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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: WARRI CRISIS - AN ITSEKIRI LEADER'S  
ADVICE FOR THE PRESIDENT

1. Summary: On April 5 EconOff met Chief Rita Lori-Ogbebor, an Itsekiri leader and a princess of the Warri Kingdom. Chief Ogbebor is one of 6 Itsekiri leaders preparing for an April 7 meeting with President Obasanjo and their Ijaw and Urhobo counterparts. They will try to resolve the continuing ethnic problems in the Niger Delta that have resulted in loss of life and property, and closure of foreign oil company operations. End summary.

2. On April 5, Chief Ogbebor told EconOff that the meeting with the President is a result of her efforts to involve him in a meaningful way to halt the hostilities in the Niger delta region. The main issue is land ownership, she said. According to Ogbebor, the Olu of Warri is the traditional guardian of the lands that comprise the 600-700 year-old Kingdom of Warri. The Ijaws, according to Ogbebor, were "sea nomads" who sailed along the coast from Ghana to Cameroon fishing and selling their catch to Itsekiri women who re-sold it in market places. Ogbebor stated that the Ijaws do not have a homeland and no one knows from whence they originated.

3. Chief Ogbebor said she wants President Obasanjo to ask the Ijaws what they want, from whence they came, and what proof have they of their origins and attachment to Warri land. She stated that she plans to "remind him" of his responsibility to ensure that all Nigerians can safely conduct legitimate economic activity and have their rights respected. To this end, she is pleased with the presence of the military forces in the Delta since they protect the Itsekiris from Ijaw attacks. Should the results of the meeting with the President be unsatisfactory, Ogbebor said she will issue a 21-day ultimatum that states that if the President does not control the Ijaws, the Itsekiris will have no choice but to engage in armed struggle. In that event, the Itsekiris' land will no longer be a part of Delta State since they will establish their own state.

4. Ogbebor disclosed that there is nonetheless disagreement within the Itsekiri camp. She and other like-minded activists advocate recourse to armed struggle to resolve the conflict with the Ijaws. But The Olu of Warri has failed to provide firm direction and his hesitancy to authorize action is one of the reasons, she said, why so many Itsekiris have been slaughtered.

5. Because continuing violence has forced large numbers of Itsekiris to flee their homes, many of them will be unable to vote in the upcoming elections. Ogbebor concluded from this that the Ijaws are attempting to control the elections through ethnic cleansing. She requested USG assistance (tents, boats, food, clothing and fishing nets) to help the displaced Itsekiris return to their homes to vote. She further asked that the USG help establish a Commission for the Safety of Minority Rights. Ogbebor has written to the United Nations and plans to go to New York within two weeks to seek UN intervention. She will argue, she said, that the Ijaws are engaged in genocide against the Itsekiris.

6. Comment: Chief Ogbebor's plan to have President Obasanjo challenge the Ijaws' right to a place in the Niger Delta certainly won't advance the peace agenda. However, her interpretation of the Ijaw-Itsekiri conflict reflects the fact that many of Nigeria's ethnic problems are rooted in squabbles over land rights and the debate about who is Nigerian. That said, we suspect that the real issue in this instance is not about control of the much-polluted land and water in the Delta region, but rather over the much bigger question of oil wealth and who benefits from it, an issue in which all Nigerians have equity.

Hinson-Jones